

# ***THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES***

## **Field Notes on Contemporary Assessment of “AraJijo”, the Yoruba Heritage of Post Child Delivery Ritual of Hot Water Body Pressing**

**Dr. Alaba Simpson**

Senior Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Crawford University, Igbesa, Ogun State, Nigeria

**Abstract:**

*The paper gives a first-hand account of the indigenous therapeutic ritual of Yoruba female elders of southwestern Nigeria in the post natal treatment of mothers and their newly delivered infants, using Ogun State, Nigeria as a study case. It notes that despite the modernity that has brought with it unimpeded contact with foreign cultures, the long term practice of hot water body pressing (arajijo) as a form medicinal cultural body maintenance has persisted among the Yoruba till the present time. The paper notes with interest that this indigenous traditional health care practice of body pressing (arajijo) nuances the dual conception of health, first as ‘well-being’ and then as ‘cosmetic’. The paper further observes that even where either of these individuals dies during the period of delivery, the body maintenance therapy is still considered to be essential for the other party, thus emphasizing the importance of this indigenous practice.*

**Keywords:** *Therapists, hot water body pressing, arajijo, post natal, body maintenance.*

### **1. The Yoruba of South Western Nigeria: A Brief Note**

A general focus on Yoruba ethnography suggests that within the larger spread of the multi-ethnic set up of Nigeria, the Yoruba stand out as the major occupants of the southwestern area in the country. They form a distinct cultural group that has received vast documentation by notable scholars, including Johnson (1897), Idowu, (1962), Imoagene (1993), Akinjogbin and Ayandele (1980) Lucas (1948). Fadipe (1970). The tribes that make up the Yoruba kingdom have been reported in Johnson’s (1897) account of the early history of the people to trace their ancestry to the ruler named Oduduwa who came from Ile Ife, which is presently located in the Osun state division of South Western Nigeria. Ogun State is a Yoruba settlement that is situated in the southwestern part of Nigeria. It became an autonomous state in 1976 when it was carved out of Ondo state. It shares borders with Lagos state to the South, Oyo and Osun to the North, and Ondo state to the east. The capital of Ogun State is Abeokuta. There are also (Egun) settlers from The Republic of Benin and Lagos State in the area.

### **2. The Social Role of the Elders among the Yoruba**

Based in particular on their experiences through their individual and collective trajectories in the society, elders (*Agba*) in Yoruba land are generally associated with healing attributes. Indigenous traditional healing methods are quite pronounced among the people, cutting across the various domains of child and maternal health care to general body maintenance.

Indeed, it is believed that the mere presence of elders (*Agba*) among the people is enough to ensure safety. To this end, the age long proverb ‘*Agbakiiwal’ojakioriomotitunwo*’ (When an elder is in the market, a new born baby cannot be endangered with twisted head) is still very much nuanced in the everyday interaction patterns of the people. This implies that elders are accredited with ‘curative’ abilities including those that specialize in the wellbeing of new born babies

Yoruba women elders hold important positions among the healers in the land and so they play crucial roles in the health related aspect of the people’s life. This is particularly reflected in the areas of childbearing, childrearing and body maintenance. Indeed, the Yoruba believe so much in procreation and the raising of children in ways that are mutually beneficial to the community into which such children are born. As a result, children in traditional Yoruba community are raised by other members of the society alongside the members of their immediate families. Based on this, the Yoruba has a saying that ‘*Ojumejil’onbimo, igbaojul’onwo o*’. (A child is born by an individual with two eyes but two hundred eyes end up looking after the child). This infers communal participation in child rearing within the Yoruba set up.

As far as body maintenance in post delivery and cosmetic situations are concerned among the Yoruba, *arajijo* is the prerogative of Yoruba female elders, based essentially on their child bearing experiences and beauty enhancement strategies that have come to form an integral part of their cultural repertoire across time. Acquisition of the knowledge applied in the therapy is usually through inheritance and constant dealings, almost on the platform of apprenticeship with elders in the business as they performed these functions.

Although oral tradition holds an important place in the intergenerational knowledge transfer of matters relating to healing and body maintenance practices among the Yoruba, actual documentation of such practices remains an important dimension in the reference tool box of the people. Kleinman and Seeman (2000:235) have observed for example that:

while experience remains a difficult and somewhat elusive subject of enquiry, one of the approaches that has proven most useful has been the use of ethnography to elucidate what is at stake for people and groups in particular local settings.

The application of ethnographic studies to body maintenance therapy relating to post natal treatment among the Yoruba will therefore contribute immensely to the documentation of health related cultural practices. It will also serve to complement information sources contained within the Yoruba heritage of Oral tradition which has until recently, dominated the information arena of indigenous traditional practices relating to healthcare patterns among the people. The perception of the important position that is occupied by oral tradition in describing the history and culture of the people is posited in a popular saying among Yoruba elders that '*Ti aobabaitan, a o baaroba*' (Even when we have missed the experiences of what is now history, we will come in contact with those who came in contact with such occurrences and so can relate them to us, the younger generation). By this is meant that there is no way that children within each generation can escape learning about the rudimentary aspects of the tradition of the elders.

The case with the Yoruba elders in the indigenous setting of *araJijo* therapy reveals a practice that is usually emphatic of the intergenerational 'hand over notes' that have kept the practice going as an indispensable part of the post natal healing life way in the society. However, actual involvement in ethnographic documentation of the practices involved in this body maintenance therapy has, until now received scant attention in the writing of the history and culture of the people. Hall (1996:1) has directed attention to the practice of archaeology, suggesting the discipline's main aim as being concerned with:

the ways in which men and women collect material evidence for the ways in which other men and women lived before them, sometimes only a few years earlier, sometimes at the dawn of humanity.

### 3. Elders' Anticipation for Safe Delivery Preceding *Arajijo*

As far as the present documentation is concerned, it is necessary to note that without the safe delivery of a pregnant mother, *Arajijo* will not be possible and the skill of the elder performing the therapy will not be open to observation and subsequent documentation. Based on this, the period of a woman's pregnancy is highly regarded among the Yoruba as in other societies as a delicate one that requires sympathy (*aanu*) and pampering (*ike*) from elders. The preparation for the performance of *Arajijo* thus begins right from the time the woman on whom the therapy is to be performed is pregnant. Along this line, Sonuga (1987:167) highlights the Yoruba greetings to a pregnant woman, revealing deep expressions of care and goodwill as portrayed in the following greetings:

E kuikunra. (Greetings for that additional weight you are bearing.)

Isokaleanfani, (Wishing you a safe delivery)

A gbṛohuniya, a gbṛohunṣoṣo. (On your delivery day, may we hear the mother's voice and may the new baby's cry be heard loud and clear).

Afṛn a gbok'o to wṛ'. (May you not give birth to a premature baby).

### 4. Meaning and Practice of *AraJijo*

As a concept, *arajijo* implies body pressing with a hot material or object. The prefix '*ara*' means 'body' while the suffix '*jijo*' refers to the art of 'hot pressing'. Literally, *arajijo* thus implies 'hot pressing'. Among the Yoruba, the existence of the practice of *AraJijo* can be said to date back to antiquity, being founded specifically within the domain of the 'curer', and positioned within the purview of post child bearing and general body mending. In his consideration of the significance of beliefs and healing in Yoruba culture, Osunwole (1990:34) expressed the view that the accumulations of the existing beliefs which make up the Yoruba worldview give expression to the people's cultural and health behavior.

Within the purview of post natal body maintenance practices, the concept of *arajijo* owes its origin to societal concern for post child delivery care that laid great emphasis on the need to eradicate or flush out 'dirty' blood and other post natal emission from the womb of a newly delivered mother, relieve the woman of after birth pains on waists, joints, muscles and other parts of the body while attempting at the same time to get the body of such a woman back to as near its normal state as possible.

Apart from their role in traditional midwifery in which pregnant women are prepared for child delivery, male members do not actively participate in the body maintenance therapy of *arajijo*. Major reasons that were given for this among those studied so far reflect the view that the intimacy that is involved in the body massage and pressing as required by the workings of the therapy does not enjoy the endorsement of men in this therapeutic venture. As such, *arajijo* is largely located within the domain of older women who are either members of the recipient's immediate family, like the mother, aunt mother-in-law or older relations. They may also be older members of the community. Sometimes, young mothers who have experienced *arajijo* after two or three births can also administer the therapy on themselves as well as on others in need of this rejuvenating therapy.

### 5. Tools and Recipients of *AraJijo*

#### 5.1. The Treatment of Mothers

On a general level, the rituals of *AraJijo* involves the use of hot clothe material (*aso*) that is dipped intermittently in hot water (*omigbigbona*) and herbs (*agbo*) in pressing and massaging the joints and knuckles (*orikerike*), breast, stomach and vaginal area as well as other relevant areas of the body of the recipients of this therapy. The woman undergoing *arajijo* is usually naked or near naked

in order to allow for a wide coverage of the hot cloth pressing exercise. She is of ten asked to place her hands on the wall and push her body backwards so as to create space between her her body and the wall. The water is usually very hot that the woman screams out in discomfort while those around the vicinity would sya to her '*se suuru, A to pari*' (be patient, it would soon be over).



Figure 1: Steaming Hot Pressing Clothe About to Be Used on the Woman Undergoing Arajijo

In the past, some women elders within the family were described as being rather ruthless in the hot water pressing of the body of some seemingly rude women as the period of care through *arajijo* usually 'shuts' the mouth of such young women. The over-pressing with hot clothe materials of a newly delivered woman has however been described as being dangerous to the health of the recipient of this therapy and is therefore not commonly found among the therapists in modern times.

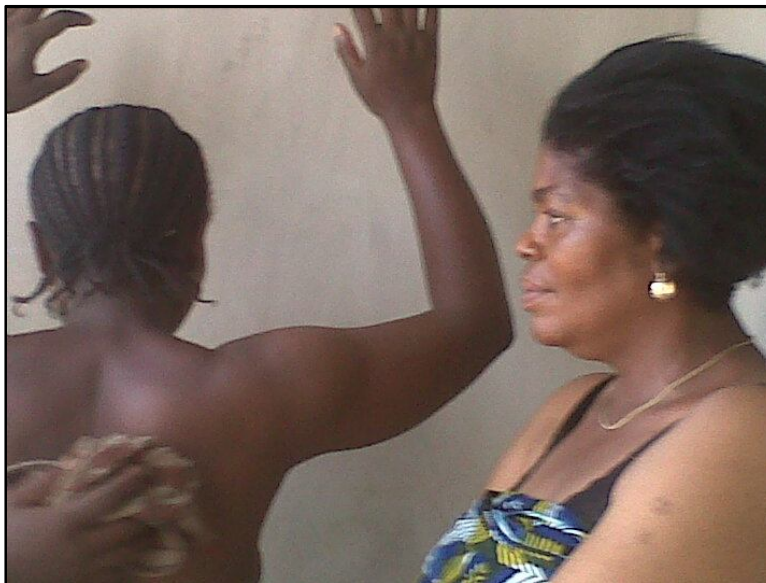


Figure 2: The Researcher Observing the Woman Holding the Wall during Arajijo

To undergo the rituals, the newly delivered mother must be in relative good health following child birth and the baby too must be seen to be fit and ready for this seeming initiation rite. After the application of *arajijo*, some apothecary which have been mixed with body soothing oil like olive oil and shear butter (*oriamo*) and placed in a crucible (*kolobo*) will be used to rub the woman's abdomen, breasts, joints, vagina area, buttocks, laps and other parts of the woman's body. This act is to eliminate blood clot and enhance free flow of the blood. It also ensures smooth skin by removing wrinkles and stretch marks, toning of the muscles and the firming up of the vaginal area.

In cases where either of the mother or baby dies during or soon after the period of delivery, the body maintenance therapy is still considered to be essential for the other party, .thus emphasizing the importance of this indigenous practice.

Where there is post delivery weakness or complications and the new mother cannot withstand the physical demands of *arajijo*, the therapists usually apply the treatment with care and minimal pressure whereas it is believed that the deeper the pressure used by the hot material on the body, the more penetrating the heat supplied and the quicker the healing received. Recovery therefore takes its time with such women, but nevertheless has some effect on them. However, in administering *arajijo* to a woman within the weakness category, the woman sits on a stool or lies on the mat or bed, with special care being taken to ensure that water does not spill on the area where the treatment is being carried out. For those who are in the position to go through the normal therapy sessions of *Arajijo*, the treatment is usually carried out in bathrooms or secluded areas where the pouring of water can be allowed.

### 5.2. The Treatment of Babies

*Arajijo* is usually administered to a baby during the process of bathing the infant. The materials used are: two plastic bath basins (*ikeiwe*) of water, one for cold water and the other for hot water. Small plastic bowl for pouring water (*ikeibuomi*) on the baby, sponge, soap in soap case, calm wood (*osun*), shear butter (*ori*), olive oil, coconut oil (*adiagbon*) and towel. The baby is thoroughly scrubbed with sponge, with the body being pressed with the therapist's fingers at spectacular areas like the lower back and joints. Baby is then massaged, thrown up, jiggled and wagged for a few minutes. In particular, the baby is held by its hands one after the other and then with the hands clasped together, is dangled up, down and sideways. This is believed to help the baby in building good muscles. The baby is also held by the ankles together, and turned upside down in a gentle swaying movement, an action that is further believed to build up its resistance to fear.



Figure 3: Pressing the baby's body after bathing him

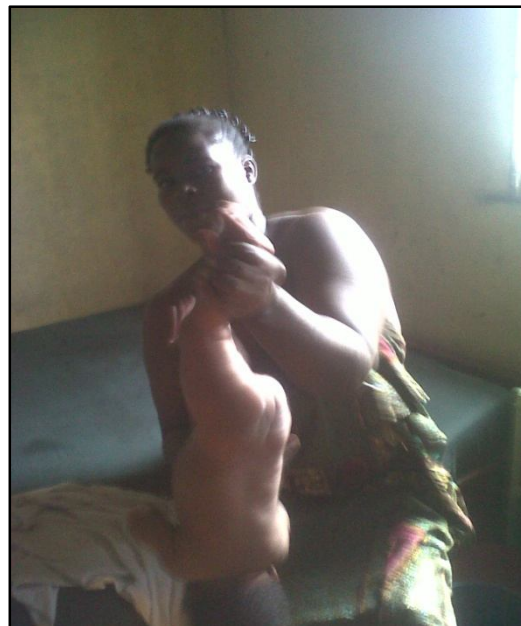


Figure 4: Baby is held in the upside down position to build resistance to fear.

The baby's head is then held between the two hands of the female elder or the experienced mother and gently turned sideways, right and left, an action that is believed will make the neck joints to be soft and flexible, enabling the baby to be able to turn its neck easily as it grows into adulthood. This is in line with the Yoruba saying that talks about the beauty of the neck being in its standing out in firmness and suppleness: *'ogunregeniyyiorun'*



*Figure 5: Gentle neck-twisting to avoid stiffnes of neck*

The baby's hands are folded behind its back and placed one on top of each other.



*Figure 6: Baby's arms are folded behind the back for the flexibility of joints*

The two legs are later held together at the ankle and bent backward at the knees, with the heels touching the baby's buttocks. Again, these are believed to ensure flexibility of the baby's joints.



Figure 7: Bending of baby's legs for flexibility of joint in the knees

#### 6. Perceived Effects of not Undergoing Post Birth Related AraJijo

The women who undergo the therapy involved in *arajijo* are generally of the belief that it is a mandatory ritual and experience for every woman who has just given birth to a baby or set of babies as the case may be. Not going through the rituals of *arajijo* implies the flaunting of motherhood related cultural expectations since it has negative consequences for the community. Mothers who do not undergo the ritual are seen in as carrying about, residues of post birth emissions that are considered unclean and dangerous. Some babies who could not undergo *arajijo* because of their delicate nature and circumstances of their birth (sickness) are also liable to possess inflexible joints. Such babies are believed to be subject to fear of heights throughout their lifetime.

#### 7. The Benefits and Efficacy of AraJijo

The efficacy of 'arajijo' is believed to be evident in the flexible body movement that is usually identified with children who went through this therapeutic art and in the quick regain of body firmness as well as a general feeling of well being in newly delivered mothers. Generally, *arajijo* is believed to build braveness in children, as they are turned upside down in their early infant stage in order to acquaint them with the possible advent of falling headlong down as they grow up. *Arajijo* also instills in newly delivered women the appreciation of the elders, whose notable concern for the health of mother and child give encouragement to younger women as they move up the ladder of motherhood in society.

#### 8. Modern Interventions in AraJijo

Particularly among those that are living in foreign lands, the practice of *arajijo* is increasingly receiving less attention among the younger generations of mothers. Such category of mothers do not usually submit themselves to *arajijo* but rather prefer to apply western type of body rejuvenation therapy in their 'painless' methods of application. Apart from this, many first time mothers undergo their maiden experience of motherhood away from the geographical location of the indigenous supervisory canopy of elders who are traditionally vast in the therapeutic art of *arajijo*. For example, some young mothers bathe their babies in the 'wash hand basin' of their homes, a practice that would be considered as being extreme and almost an abomination by Yoruba elders and practitioners of *arajijo*. Considering the nature of the 'Wash hand basin', babies are given their baths while the mother maintains a standing, position. This is a far cry from the sitting position that is usually adopted by Yoruba elders who would also ensure that from their sitting positions, the rituals of *AraJijo* are performed on the babies.

#### 9. Conclusion

In spite of the diverse changes that have been brought about by modernity, *arajijo* is still very much a part of the post natal health oriented culture which still harbours traditional concepts and beliefs. Also, certain weaknesses are getting more obvious in the dispensation of the therapy. For example, present day commitment to work and other activities have tended to reduce the time frame that was earlier associated with the traditional practice of *arajijo*. However, its continued appreciation by the people as an indigenous practice makes it an available cultural phenomenon which provides us with ready information that can be kept for archival references.

#### 10. Notes

1. This paper derived from the presentation I made at the University of Bristol during the TAG 2010 (December 2010) conference (Session on Medicine, Healing, Performance - University of Manchester team).

2. I acknowledge the contributions of Dr. A. O Abisoye, Dr. J.O. Ayodele and Olatunji Olamilekan of the College of Business and Social Sciences, Crawford University, Ogun state, Nigeria for their support in terms of editing and suggestions for the layout of this field report.
3. I express my appreciation to those who granted me the opportunity of documenting the information on *arajijo*, particularly to those who made it possible to take photographs of the therapy while it was in session.

## 11. References

- i. Akinjogbin, I.A., & Ayandele, A., (1980). "Yorubaland up to 1800." in Obaro Ikime, Groundwork of Nigerian History. Ibadan: Heinemann.
- ii. Daramola, O., & Jeje, A., (1967). Awon Asaati Orisa Ile wa (The traditions and gods of our land) Ibadan: Onibon Oje Press
- iii. Hall, M. (1996). Archaeology Africa. London: James Currey Ltd.
- iv. Hunter, D.E., & Foley, M.B., (1976). Doing Anthropology. A student centered approach to cultural anthropology. New York: Harper and Row Publishers.
- v. Idowu, B. (1971). Olodumare, God in Yoruba Belief. Theford: Lowe and Brown Printers Ltd.
- vi. Imoagene, O. (1993). The Yoruba of South Western Nigeria. Know Your Country Series. A Handbook of Nigeria's Major Culture Areas. 2. Ibadan: New Era Publishers.
- vii. Johnson, S. (1897). History of the Yorubas. Lagos: C.M.S (Nigeria) Bookshops
- viii. Kleinman, A., & Seeman D., (2000). "Personal Experience of Illness" in Garry L. Albrecht, Ray Fitzpatrick, & Susan C. Scrimshaw (Eds) The handbook of social studies in health and medicine. London: Sage Publication. Pp 230-242.
- ix. Lucas, A.O. (1999). "Healthcare in Nigeria: Present Status. Future Goals" in Gabi Williams, Lola, D., & Wepo, S., Healthcare in Nigeria: Present Status. Future Goals. Nigeria: Obafemi Awolowo Foundation. Pp 9-34.
- x. Lucas, J.O. (1948). The Religion of the Yorubas. Lagos: CMS Bookshop.
- xi. Ogunbameru, K.A., & Rotimi, W.R., (1996). Man and His Social Environment, A textbook of sociology. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited.
- xii. Osunwole, S.A. (1990). "The significance of Beliefs and Healing in Yoruba Culture" in African notes journal of the institute of African studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. Pp 30-36
- xiii. Rotimi, W. (1996). 'Social Expectations' in Ogunbameru, K.A., & Rotimi, W.R., (1996) Man and His Social Environment, A textbook of sociology. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited. Pp 119-135.
- xiv. Scrimshaw, S. (2001). "Culture, Behaviour and Health" in Michael H Merson, Robert E. Black & Ann J. Mills International Public Health, Diseases, Programs, Systems and Policies. Maryland: Aspen Publishers Inc. Pp 53-78
- xv. Simpson, A.O. (2001). The Culture of Vodun and Ancestor Worship. Nigeria: Interlingua Limited.
- xvi. Sonuga, G. (1897). Lagos State Life and Culture. Lagos: Ministry of information and culture, Ikeja, Lagos. Gabumo Publishing Company Limited.